

Three-day nurses strike at Charité and Vivantes hospitals in Berlin

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The trade union Verdi has called nursing staff at the state-owned hospital groups Charité and Vivantes out on a three-day warning strike by thousands of workers between Monday and Wednesday this week. The union was forced to call the action because of the widespread outrage among nurses who have performed superhuman tasks during the pandemic and now find that unbearable working conditions and low pay have become the norm.

Verdi is negotiating a so-called “relief collective agreement,” which would pay nursing staff bonuses or give them time off from the exhausting hours they face due to chronic understaffing and other factors. Verdi also said it wants salaries at Vivantes’ subsidiaries brought in line with the public sector collective agreement (TVÖD). Currently, the 2,500 employees at these subsidiaries receive several hundred euros less than those doing the same work at Vivantes.

Verdi gave management at Vivantes and Charité a deadline of 100 days to present a “negotiable offer.” After they failed to do so, the union called the warning strike. This was ostensibly “the last warning” before a ballot on indefinite industrial action, which Verdi says would start on August 30 if there is no movement in negotiations.

The response among workers to the partial strike has been solid. Workers at all eight Vivantes hospitals and the three Charité campuses want to strike, and entire wards are expected to be closed by Tuesday morning. According to the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, Charité has already cancelled 2,000 appointments with missed treatments to be made up after Wednesday. Almost all departments are affected, from surgery and dermatology to geriatrics and gastroenterology. Fewer beds will be available in intensive care units during this time.

Widespread popular support

The strike has won widespread support from the public. Messages of solidarity are accumulating on the website of broadcaster rbb24, which regularly reports on the industrial dispute and working conditions at the hospitals. “Good luck with the strike—stand firm!,” “Hang in there!” and “I wish the workers in the sector good luck with their industrial action! Enough of making profits on the backs of workers and patients,” are some of the comments.

Many commentators note the hypocritical praise the nurses received from corporate executives, politicians and the media last year and how they are being disrespected today. “This is how you treat heroes? Got it; the real ‘heroes’ all want to be in the Bundestag [parliament]. No wonder with that salary.”

“A year ago, nurses, careers etc. were applauded for their constant willingness to work, often to the point of exhaustion. In the pandemic, the whole dilemma of our society became obvious. ... Those who blow millions on nonsensical foreign [military] missions should start doing the job better!”

Other comments denounced the enrichment of those at the top of society. “Billions are thrown in the craw of the pharmaceutical corporations and yet there is no money for nursing staff,” one commentator said. Another added, “Financialisation also continues in the health sector. The extremely unequal distribution of income and wealth continues. It’s time this was finally brought to an end.”

Management at the two hospital groups have reacted with ruthless arrogance towards the strikers’ concerns. Vivantes said it would not accept a collective agreement because the nationwide shortage of skilled workers means a reduction in nurses’ workload would force the company to cut 360 to 750 beds. Consequently, the company would have to dismiss doctors and other non-nursing staff. “The result would be a reduction of 870 to 1,300 jobs and an additional deficit of 25 to 45 million euros,” management claimed.

This blackmail leaves one speechless. Instead of making the nursing profession more attractive through better working conditions and pay, Vivantes blames nursing staff for the reduction of beds and jobs because they refuse to be exploited to the hilt.

In fact, the miserable working conditions and decades of austerity imposed on the health system are responsible for the shortage of qualified personnel. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, Germany had a shortage of about 120,000 nurses. During the pandemic, the attrition rate has risen.

According to surveys, about a third of nurses in the intensive care sector are considering leaving the profession or at least reducing their working hours. The reason given by 72 percent of respondents is overwork. Ninety-six percent feel abandoned by political decision-makers.

At the request of the company, the Berlin Labour Court banned a strike last week at Vivantes’ subsidiaries, which provide meals and laundry service. The court justified its attack on the right to strike by claiming there was no emergency service agreement in place between Verdi and the company. Without such an agreement, a strike could lead to a danger to the life and limb of patients, the court said.

Verdi offered a comprehensive emergency service deal, but the company rejected it after days of negotiations, arguing it was management’s responsibility to develop such a plan. If the ruling is upheld on appeal, it would set a dangerous precedent allowing corporations to essentially render strikes ineffective at will. “This view of the court shocks us,” Verdi spokesperson Tim Graumann said,

“because that would mean that employers could dictate emergency services.”

Verdi’s double game

Verdi is playing a despicable double game in this dispute. Although the industrial action enjoys broad support among the workforce and the population, the union is obsequiously begging and pleading for a rotten compromise.

Last Friday, the union’s collective bargaining committee published an “appeal to the hospital managements and state politicians” under the heading “Negotiate, negotiate, negotiate!” It begins with the words, “The collective bargaining committees of Vivantes subsidiaries, Vivantes proper and Charité hereby declare: It is not our intention to strike!” It continues in this style. “We are ready to negotiate. At any time,” the Verdi officials affirm several times.

The union bureaucrats do not shy away from self-humiliation to prove that they want to avoid an escalation of the conflict at all costs. The hospital strike coincides with the shutdown of urban transit trains in Berlin by members of the GDL railway union and large demonstrations by Siemens workers against the planned closure of the gas turbine factory, the largest industrial plant in the city.

Verdi is in cahoots with the Berlin Senate (state executive), which consists of a coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Left Party and Greens. Most Verdi officials are members of one of these three parties and often move from union positions to political office and back. Now they are feigning outrage that the hospital management is allegedly acting contrary to the will of the Senate.

In background talks, members of the state parliament from the three ruling parties and the Free Democrats (FDP) and Christian Democrats (CDU), assured Verdi that they supported the demand for minimum staffing levels, according to the union’s collective bargaining commission’s appeal. “That is why we, as health workers, do not understand how it can be that while all the parties in parliament elected by the citizens advocate a common stance, the hospital managements of the state-owned companies do not behave according to this basic stance.”

The reason is easy to understand. The two hospital groups—which are wholly owned by the state but run according to private profit principles—were created by the Senate to systematically lower wages and working conditions and to turn health into a source of profit.

The Vivantes group, founded in 2001, now oversees about a third of Berlin’s hospital patients. It employs almost 18,000 people, including 13,000 full-time staff, and has annual revenues of 1.5 billion euros. Its top managers collect over half a million euros a year to keep staff costs low and the group profitable.

These austerity measures have been implemented with the full support of Verdi, which has worked and continues to work closely with the Senate.

In 2016, for example, Charité employees experienced the “historic” collective agreement negotiated by Verdi, through which the staff was simply cheated. Even union representatives had to admit time and again that staffing targets were barely met.

The struggle by cleaning and kitchen staff for adequate wages has also been sabotaged by Verdi for years. Verdi will betray the workers at the Vivantes’ subsidiaries just as it did with Charité’s service

company CFM (Charité-Facility-Management).

At CFM, which was spun off 15 years ago to introduce low wages, there have been countless strikes and protests. They were all sold out by Verdi without any improvements for the workers. After the protests increased, Verdi and the Berlin Senate initiated the buyback of CFM in 2019 and agreed on a collective agreement for CFM workers last year that contains no or only minimal improvements.

Talks are again taking place behind the scenes between the Senate, Verdi and the hospital management on how to steer the strike into harmless channels and strangle it. According to the *Tagesspiegel*, there have already been talks between Finance Senator (state minister) Matthias Kollatz (SPD) and Verdi officials. Significantly, Kollatz is also head of the supervisory board of Vivantes.

All over the world, workers are having the same experience with the reprehensible role of the trade unions. In Worcester, Massachusetts in the USA, 700 nurses employed by hospital operator Tenet have been on strike for nearly six months. Although their strike has strong support, the union is isolating it to keep it under control.

In Quebec, Canada, health care unions have negotiated a deal with the regional government against the workers’ wishes, paving the way for further attacks on wages and working conditions. The list could go on. Workers everywhere face the same attacks and problems. A successful struggle against this can only be waged in opposition to the unions and parties responsible for the disaster in the health sector.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees by striking workers to organise a struggle against hospital management and mobilise the necessary support. The Fourth International, to which the SGP belongs as the German section, launched the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees on May Day to coordinate struggles in different factories, industries and countries.

Privatisation and all cuts in the health sector must be reversed. Hospitals and other health facilities must be transformed into public utilities and democratically controlled by the workers. This is the only way to guarantee decent wages and humane working conditions. This is what the SGP is standing for in the upcoming Bundestag (federal parliament) and Berlin Senate elections.



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